SACRIFICE AND DOMINION

SACRIFICE AND DOMINION

AN ECONOMIC COMMENTARY ON ACTS

GARY NORTH

POINT FIVE PRESS
Dallas, Georgia

Sacrifice and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Acts

Published by
Point Five Press
P.O. Box 2778
Dallas, Georgia 30132

Typesetting by Kyle Shepherd

This book is dedicated to

John Livingston

a deacon who takes Acts 6 seriously

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, Until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen: To whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God: And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.

ACTS 1:1–5

A. The Last Days

The Book of Acts offers a narrative of the last days of the Old Covenant order. The last days had begun with Jesus' ministry. A new era of direct revelation from God had marked its beginning. The last days were announced by the Epistle to the Hebrews. "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds" (Heb. 1:1–2). These last days would end in A.D. 70 at the fall of Jerusalem, when covenantally authoritative revelation from God ceased.[1]

During the preliminary phase of the last days, the author of Hebrews said, God had spoken to the apostles through Jesus Christ. But, after Christ's ascension to heaven, God began to speak to the apostles by the Holy Ghost, as we read in the second chapter of Acts. Jesus had said of the Holy Ghost, "I have yet many things to say unto

1. Kenneth L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew it unto you" (John 16:12–15). The last days were marked by direct verbal revelation from God through Jesus Christ, and subsequently through the Third Person of the Trinity. The first two chapters of Acts describe this transition.

B. Two Covenants

During this transitional era, Christians lived under two covenants, Old and New. The Mosaic Covenant's priesthood still offered sacrifices in the temple, even after Jesus, the supreme high priest, had offered the final sacrifice. "And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. Whereof the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us: for after that he had said before, This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more. Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin" (Heb. 10:11–18).

This was a transitional era because the two covenants overlapped. Direct revelation from God was given to New Covenant apostles and Old Covenant prophets, John the Baptist being the greatest of the latter. "For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Luke 7:28). God still spoke to men authoritatively, who in turn spoke and wrote down God's words authoritatively. We are now under the authority of a written Bible that was put onto parchment during those last days. We are to shape our thoughts and lives by means of the information in the Bible. The New Covenant is marked by conditions, and the Bible is where we learn what these conditions are.

This places considerable responsibility on anyone who seeks to sort out what was transitional in the last days from what is perma-

nent in the New Covenant era. The Book of Acts is a document of the transition. Some of the things it records are no longer mandated for Christians. For example, it records the existence of joint prophesying that each listener heard in his native language (Acts 2:4–8). It describes a system of common property owned by the Jerusalem church and administered by church officers (Acts 2:41–42; 4:33–37). It records the public testimony of an accused man whose message was confirmed to him alone by a vision from the Holy Ghost, and whose verbal description of this vision cost him his life (Acts 7:55–58). It speaks of female prophets (Acts 21:8–9). It tells of a man who was immune to a deadly snake bite (Acts 28:3–6). On these matters, we have not been told by Jesus, "Go, and do thou likewise" (Luke 10:37b).

Nevertheless, there are modern expositors who would have us go and do likewise with one or another of these transitional practices. But there is a noticeable selectivity on the part of those who do tell us that we should do this. Rural American congregations whose members still pick up poisonous snakes as a church ritual do not practice common ownership. Neither do those congregations that subordinate themselves to women who claim to be prophets. Some Christians affirm the continuing existence of authoritative revelation from people who speak in an unrecognizable tongue during a church service, but they do not send out teams of missionaries to speak in an unearthly tongue that listeners will hear in their own languages. This is smorgasbord Christianity: a little of this, none of that, and all in terms of personal taste.

The Book of Acts is famous for its description of a system of commonly held property in the Jerusalem church. The apostles accepted donations—very large donations—from members of the Jerusalem church. This practice has been used by defenders of Christian socialism as an example to be imitated by the modern world. But these socialists do not cite Peter's words to Ananias regarding the latter's property: "Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power?" (Acts 5:4a).[2] The common ownership of the Jerusalem church was voluntary, limited in Acts to that one congregation, and administered by men who had special revelation from God. What has this to do with modern socialism, which is compulsory, imposed on all people in a society, and is administered by bureaucrats backed up by the police? Nothing.

2. Chapter 4.

C. The Economics of the Book of Acts

There is not much information in the Book of Acts regarding economic practice, and even less regarding economic theory. The narrative is concerned with missionary activity: first in Jerusalem, then in the Mediterranean world. Much of the book is taken up with the ministry of the apostle Paul. To a lesser extent, it describes the early activities of Peter and other apostles in Jerusalem. We learn that persecution was the order of the day: from Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem and Roman officials in gentile cities. Paul described what he had suffered, "in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness" (II Cor. 11:23–27).

In the midst of this persecution, God was active in sustaining His messengers by miracles. Peter was released from prison by an angel—an act that cost his Roman escorts their lives (Acts 12). Paul and Silas had the option of an escape as a result of a miraculous earthquake, but they remained in their cells, along with all the other prisoners—an even greater miracle—which led to the conversion of their jailer (Acts 16). These were not normal events. They had nothing unique to do with economics.

The author of the Book of Acts is assumed to be Luke, for both documents are addressed to the same man, Theophilus (Luke 1:3, Acts 1:1). The Gospel of Luke is detailed in its account of Jesus' words on economics.[3] The author in Acts described certain practices of the early church, but he did not relate them to his account in the Gospel of Luke. This presents a problem. The expositor must discover whether the practices of the early church described in Acts are unique to the last days before the fall of Jerusalem or whether they were permanent aspects of the New Covenant order.

What becomes apparent from Acts is the love that church members had for one another. They also had remarkable trust in the sound

3. Gary North, *Treasure and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012).

economic judgment apostles, to whom they entrusted the church's money. Yet, even here, the apostles were not immune from criticism. The dispute in the church at Jerusalem over the distribution of church funds to widows (Acts 6) reveals that money was a divisive topic then, as now.[4]

Christians shared their money with one another. They saw their mission to the world as mandating a sacrificial degree of charity to fund this missionary effort. They understood that they were members of a revolutionary organization that was committed to peace. They were to pray for peace. Paul wrote: "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" (I Tim. 2:1–2).[5] They recognized that they were challenging the social order of the day. Persecution was all too common. "And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles" (Acts 8:1b). So, they shared. They took capital that they would normally have held in reserve for themselves and their families, and they gave it to other Christians through the apostles and local church officers. They saw their efforts as common, and they pooled their capital in order to reduce their personal risks. The church functioned as a kind of insurance agency, which an extended family is.

The degree of sharing revealed more than an insurance company in action. There was true sacrificial giving. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth regarding the money collected in Macedonia for the church at Jerusalem: "Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia; How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality. For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves; Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints" (II Cor. 8:1–4). In their poverty, the Macedonians had given liberally.

---

4. Chapter 5.

5. Gary North, *Hierarchy and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on First Timothy*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2001] 2012), ch. 2.

D. Condemnation of Today's Christians

There can be no doubt that the modern church has lost the vision of the church in Acts. As it has grown richer, it has become less liberal with its money. That is to say, as Christians have grown wealthy, they have grown stingy. Their giving is not marked by liberality.

Modern economic theory teaches that a person allocates his money to deal with his most pressing desires first. These desires include dealing with problems: *the reduction of discontent*. As he allocates his money over time, the less important problems get dealt with later in the process. *People use their income to solve problems or gain advantages in a declining order of importance*. He who is dying of thirst spends his money on water before he buys salt. This is the doctrine of marginal utility. The doctrine of marginal utility rests on an assumption: unchanging tastes. But, over time, people's tastes do change. As they gain more income, their tastes change. They get a taste for more income.

If men's tastes did not change, their proportional giving to charity would increase as they gained more income. They would use their early income to deal with their minimal needs, but as these needs were satisfied, one by one, they would be more likely to give money away. Competition for their money on their personal scale of values would decline in the level of intensity. Yet we rarely find that men's proportional giving increases as they grow richer. Wants replace biological needs at the top of their wish list as their needs are satisfied by their rising income. When men no longer face starvation, they develop a taste for more expensive food. They move from poverty in the direction of gluttony. Concern over their weight replaces any concern over possible starvation, including third-world starvation. What they spend on diet programs and exercise programs, they might have spent on world missions, had their tastes not changed from their days of low income. But their tastes did change.

The Macedonian church in its poverty gave more, proportionally, than the richer church at Corinth had given. Like the widow in Jesus' lesson regarding the mites (Luke 21:1–4),[6] the poverty-stricken Macedonians were more generous than their richer brethren in Corinth. This phenomenon has not changed since the last days of the Old Covenant order. As men become richer, their dedication wanes. As Christians become more able financially to rely on their capital to sustain them, and as the price of necessities falls in relation to total income, they donate

6. North, *Treasure and Dominion*, ch. 48.

a smaller proportion of their income to the church. Churches usually finance local building programs before they finance foreign missions.

I suggest a reason for this seeming anomaly. As Christians become richer, they trust more in their own devices to sustain them (Deut. 8:17–18).[7] When they possess next to nothing, they trust God for their futures, for there is no one else to trust with confidence. But, as people grow richer, they transfer hope from God to their possessions. They become more self-confident. But they know that they lack omniscience. So, they feel compelled to amass ever-more capital to protect them from unforeseen hard times and for their old age. They can never amass enough capital to substitute for God's providence, but they try. They begin by questioning the moral requirement of the tithe.[8]

Conclusion

The Book of Acts does not contain much information on economics. That is why this commentary is short. It took less time to write than any of the others. But the account of common property in the Jerusalem church has become so well known, and so misunderstood, that I thought it wise to write this short commentary.

I have titled this commentary, *Sacrifice and Dominion*. The title reflects the practice of sacrificial giving and sharing by members of the earliest local congregations, not just in the church at Jerusalem. These early Christians trusted God greatly, and the degree of this trust can be seen in their level of giving. They gave to the church the capital that had previously provided them with streams of income. They counted on God to replace these income streams.

The Book of Acts is a book about missionary activity. Members of the early congregations regarded themselves as part of a great missionary effort. They took seriously the Great Commission: "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (Matt. 28:18–20).[9]

---

7. Gary North, *Inheritance and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1999] 2012), chaps. 21–22.

8. Gary North, *The Covenantal Tithe* (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, 2011).

9. Gary North, *Priorities and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Matthew*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 48. Kenneth L. Gentry, *The Greatness of the Great Commission* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990).

Two millennia later, the incomparably wealthy American churches have generally lost this vision. Meanwhile, European nations that were conquered in Christ's name after the collapse of the Roman Empire have adopted a Christ-denying humanism. There is little trace of any Christian influence in Protestant Europe today. Christianity has steadily surrendered both its territory and its influence. The population explosion of the last two centuries has led to a foreign mission field that has more souls in desperate need of redemption than ever before. This has been paralleled by an increase of missionary activity by Protestant churches, which were not committed to foreign missions prior to the Moravian church's foreign missionary activity in the mid-eighteenth century.[10] But, as a percentage of Christians' personal income worldwide, which includes Catholicism, funding for foreign missions remains tiny. One recent estimate puts it at less than one-tenth of one percent.[11] This limited worldwide missionary impulse is dominated by the United States. The rest of the Western world is even less dedicated in its support of foreign missions. The dual discrepancies between spiritual need and giving, and between personal wealth and giving, do not improve significantly with the increase in wealth.

"Sacrifice" is not a word popular among contemporary Christians in the West. This is why Christianity is in retreat in the West.

10. Baptist William Carey went to India in 1793. The International Bible Society was established in 1809. Hudson Taylor founded the China Inland Mission in 1865.

11. Personal income for Christians: $12.7 trillion. Income for global foreign missions: $12 billion. In 1900, the respective figures were $270 billion and $200 million, so things are slightly better today. The world's population was 1.6 billion in 1900 and 6 billion today. "Status of Global Mission, 2000, in context of 20th and 21st centuries," published by the Global Evangelization Movement. Source: David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (Jan. 2000). Such estimates are better than guesses, but we should not place too much faith in them. The older the recorded data, the less confidence we should have.

1

COMMON OWNERSHIP

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common.

ACTS 2:41–44

The theocentric focus of this passage is the fear of God: sanctions.[1] The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth for ever" (Psa. 111:10). The fear of God comes in many forms. In this case, it persuaded thousands of new converts to Christ to pool their property with other new converts. This was an unprecedented declaration of faith.

A. Family-Like Authority

For heads of households to transfer their wealth to the church, they had to assume that the church would be run as a family is run. Family members may pool resources, but someone with final authority must make the spending decisions. The presumption is that he will make these decisions on the basis of his perception of family priorities. When these new converts gave their wealth to the church, they were making the same assumption about the apostles' judgment. They viewed them as heads of the wider household.

1. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 4. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, 2010), ch. 4.

Church members began to participate in joint activities that had family meals as the central event. "And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart" (Acts 2:46). These family-based meals marked the new community of the church as separate from the temple. These shared meals identified the church as a subset of the Jewish community. The members still attended the temple, but they attended other meals.

The church was not a family. It was and remains a separate covenantal institution. But the Jerusalem church would soon have a special function. It was to become the headquarters of what would become a worldwide missionary movement (Acts 15). The apostles had been commanded by Jesus to return to the city. "And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me" (Acts 1:4). To this command a positive sanction was attached: "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (1:8).

There was another factor. Jesus had warned the disciples about a coming judgment on the city. "And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judaea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto. For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled" (Luke 21:20–22). Those who knew about this prophecy did not know when this event would take place, but they knew that they had better not be encumbered with a lot of property, especially real estate, when the day arrived.

The response of listeners to Peter's first sermon in Jerusalem was overwhelming. Three thousand people shifted their commitment from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant in one day. This was an immense number. There were no microphones and loudspeakers to amplify Peter's voice. This was in response to a fisherman's appeal.

They perceived that they were joining a remarkable movement. They adopted the apostles' doctrine. The apostles performed signs and wonders. This added to their authority. Those who were part of the new organization were in fear of the apostles. This was not merely awe; it was motivational fear. The Greek word for fear in this passage

also appears in the account of the earthquake after Christ's death. It indicates great fear. "And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men" (Matt. 28:2–4).

The authority possessed by the apostles was considerable. New converts trusted them and feared them. This was the basis of their pooling of funds. They regarded the apostles as reliable stewards of church funds because the apostles were in possession of supernatural powers. This indicated supernatural authority. The members believed that if they sold their goods and transferred their money to the apostles, they would not be cheated. They probably believed that the corporately held funds would serve as a form of insurance, as with assets held in trust by the head of a household.

B. Shared Faith, Shared Goods

The English text says that the disciples were together. The Greek text does not. It says, "all believed all common." The Greek work for "common" can mean "unholy," in contrast to "clean." The word is used this way repeatedly in the Book of Acts. "But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean" (Acts 10:14). As in English, it can also mean jointly held. "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 1:3). It is used in this sense in this passage.

They shared a confession. This shared confession led to their baptism and their membership in the church. This placed them under the authority of a shared eldership. They shared all these things before they shared their wealth with other members.

The sale of their possessions to those outside the circle of faith created strong bonds with those inside. Members had transferred their capital and consumer goods to covenant-breakers. Then they transferred the money to covenant-keepers who acted as trustees for the assembly. This transfer of assets was a means of demonstrating publicly their commitment to the local assembly. This, in turn, was a means of evangelism. "And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having

favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47).

What people do with their money testifies strongly to what they believe. These new members were transferring control over their money to officers in a new organization. When 3,000 local residents sold their property and give their money to a group of former wanderers who are now performing miracles, word got around fast. It was not just a matter of giving money away, which is always remarkable. It was a matter of self-interest. When 3,000 people start selling of their families' inheritances, buyers get in line. There might be some real bargains! This phrase would have been everywhere: "Have you heard?"

The outsider's question, "How serious are these people?" had an answer. This answer testified to their degree of commitment. These men had transferred all of their wealth, which would then be used on behalf of a new assembly. This is not a normal practice. The abnormality of the practice matched the abnormality of both the group and its leaders. The question, "Why?" would have been common.

C. The Way to Poverty

Common property is not normally the way to wealth. It can be, however, in very rare cases. Medieval agricultural monasteries repeatedly grew rich, which led to periodic calls for reform. They began with vows of poverty, and a few centuries later, they were centers of opulence. The Benedictines were renowned for their ability to amass wealth. Their members initially lived frugal lives. The abbots poured any surplus resources back into production. The monasteries accumulated capital, including intellectual capital. Monks devoted time to the science of agriculture. Output kept increasing.

At the center of a monastic order was the abbot. He had authority over the members. Discipline was tighter than family discipline in society at large. The monasteries functioned as families. Members were celibate. They did not accumulate property to be passed on to their children. The inheritance was corporate. Capital formation was corporate.

Leaders of the church in Jerusalem could not expect to establish anything comparable to a monastic order in Jerusalem. They knew that judgment on the city was coming. They could not legitimately expect to retain the social structure of an extended family. Yet, initially, this is what the Jerusalem church was.

In a family, no member achieves wealth apart from claims on this wealth from other members. These claims come to the patriarch, who collects wealth from all members and then distributes it from a common treasury. The welfare of all members is maintained by a patriarch who must try to balance these competing claims. If he fails, discontented sons will secede. The greater the number of opportunities to gain replacement income, the lower the cost of secession. A large number of employment opportunities is what keep Western families from becoming extended families. Before Western capitalism spread to southern and eastern Europe, immigrants to the United States and Canada arrived who had come from cultures where extended families were common. As individuals became integrated socially, the extended family disappeared. The third generation rarely remained under the same roof, real or figurative, with the patriarch, unless the patriarch was living in the household of a third-generation member. Some Asian immigrant families seem to be able to retain the older structure longer than other immigrant groups, but this solidarity is usually reinforced with a family-run business. A bachelor's degree serves as a kind of honorable discharge from full-time service inside a patriarchal family. Patriarchal families have disappeared.

The Hutterites still maintain some degree of common property. Their agricultural communities are economically successful, but by the standards of the society around them, their members are individually poor. These communities exist in isolation from the general culture. Their system of common ownership is a major factor in maintaining this separation. This is why members consent to the arrangement. They seek separation for religious purposes. These communities practice tight discipline. They are protected by the laws of a surrounding society that leaves them alone and protects their property. But if birth rates inside and outside these communities were to remain constant for several centuries, the Hutterites would replace the general society. Long before then, the problems associated with common ownership would challenge the survival of these separatist agricultural communities.

In Jerusalem, the primary social foundation of personal wealth accumulation ceased when a family transferred its capital to the church. This created a barrier to future capital formation. The incentive to save, invest wisely, and build up capital is reduced when the sacrificing agent does not possess a legal claim on the fruits of his labor. Thus, the practice of sharing property is a disincentive to increased

family income and thrift. It tends to equalize family income among the members. Under such an arrangement, Christians in Jerusalem would have become poorer than the community average. If the days of vengeance were delayed for a generation, members of the church in Jerusalem would either suffer reduced income or else they would cease sharing their property. The days of vengeance were delayed for a generation.[2]

We know that Paul repeatedly took up collections for the Jerusalem church. "But now I go unto Jerusalem to minister unto the saints. For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem" (Rom. 15:25–26). "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come. And when I come, whomsoever ye shall approve by your letters, them will I send to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem" (I Cor. 16:1–3).[3] The Jerusalem church suffered repeated persecutions by the local authorities (Acts 8:1). Its members also could not plan for their long-term futures because of Jesus' prophecy regarding the days of vengeance.

Conclusion

The apostles initially possessed authority based on both doctrine and miracle-working. This made them trustworthy stewards of God and men in the opinion of thousands of heads of households in Jerusalem. This is what made possible a system of hierarchical economic authority over the funds collected by the church. Without the apostles' perceived authority under God, a system of voluntary common property would not have been possible, for the heads of households would not have had sufficient trust in those who were administering the church's funds on behalf of all of its members.

The threat of God's judgment on the city was another factor that persuaded members to surrender ownership of real estate. Expectations of a long-term return on real estate were undermined. But this eschatological factor does not explain the practice of common property. It only explains the sale of the real estate.

By accepting responsibility over the assets of church members, the

2. David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth, Texas: Dominion Press, 1987).

3. Gary North, *Judgment and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on First Corinthians*, 2nd ed.(Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2001] 2012), ch. 17.

apostles converted the early church into a large extended family. This is not the normal pattern for a church. Church leaders do not want to take on the authority of family patriarchs. There are too many competing claims to the wealth generated by members. Church leaders no longer perform miracles. They no longer generate the same degree of confidence among members in their unique access to divine wisdom. Without largely voluntary assent to the decisions of church leaders, a common property system cannot come into existence, let alone survive for generations. Such assent is rare.

2

BETTER THAN MONEY

> *Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour. And a certain man lame from his mother's womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms of them that entered into the temple; Who seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple asked an alms. And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, Look on us. And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something of them. Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk. And he took him by the right hand, and lifted him up: and immediately his feet and ancle bones received strength.*
>
> ACTS 3:1–7

The theocentric principle here is God as the agent of healing in history: sanctions, which is point four of the biblical covenant.[1]

A. Authentication

This passage is famous because of the King James Version's phrase, "Silver and gold have I none." These two apostles, who have become the best known of the dozen throughout history, were trustees for the funds of the Jerusalem church, but they were carrying no money. They did not possess assets of their own to share with this crippled beggar.

1. Public Healing

The way that the man was healed was ideal for the spread of the gospel. It was during the hour for public prayer: the ninth hour, or

1. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 4. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, 2010), ch. 4.

three in the afternoon. This was the same hour that Jesus died on the cross (Luke 23:44). The apostles were just outside the temple. The beggar had secured for himself a permanent spot near a gate of the temple. He was well known by sight and site. We could say that he was a fixture. More local residents recognized him than recognized the apostles. Thus, after he was healed, word would get around fast.

The man did not know who they were. "And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, Look on us. And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something of them." He did not associate them with Jesus, who had performed many miraculous acts of healing. He was not a church member. Peter then announced, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk." Jesus' name was well known. He was the criminal who had been crucified instead of Barabbas (John 18:40). Peter linked himself with Jesus by means of this invocation. The subsequent healing magnified Christ's name.

The event became known immediately. "And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God: And they knew that it was he which sat for alms at the Beautiful gate of the temple: and they were filled with wonder and amazement at that which had happened unto him" (Acts 3:8–10). This was preparatory for Peter's second public sermon.

> And when Peter saw it, he answered unto the people, Ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at this? or why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk? The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go. But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses. And his name through faith in his name hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all. And now, brethren, I wot [know] that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers. But those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled (Acts 3:12–18).

2. Covenant Lawsuit

Peter here delivered a covenant lawsuit against Old Covenant Israel. This sermon would have been far less impressive, had he not just healed a lifelong cripple. The positive sanction of healing to some

considerable degree authenticated Peter's authority to bring a covenant lawsuit that announced negative sanctions. "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began. For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people" (Acts 3:19–23). Jesus had possessed a prophet's ability to heal. Now it was possessed by Peter. The prophet's task was to bring a covenant lawsuit. Peter was doing this.

A gift of money would not have gained the cripple permanent relief, nor would it have provided Peter with the authority that this act of healing provided. The very poverty of Peter in this instance augmented his authority. He did not heal anyone for money, although anyone who possessed such power could have gained enormous wealth by selling his services to the sickly rich. Peter had just healed a beggar who obviously could not repay him. In this, he imitated Christ, who had healed many poor people in the name of God the Father, and who did not accept payment even from those who could afford to pay.

The effectiveness of this approach to public confrontation can be seen in the result. In response to this sermon, another 5,000 men believed in Christ (Acts 4:4). So, with just two sermons, the church grew by 8,000 people. The first sermon had been accompanied by the miracle of tongues: each listener heard the message in his region's local language. The second sermon had been preceded by physical healing. It was even more successful.

The healing and the subsequent sermon raised the ire of the Sadducees, who were closely associated with rulership in the temple. They had Peter and John forcibly brought into their presence. Peter then brought a covenant lawsuit against them. "If we this day be examined of the good deed done to the impotent man, by what means he is made whole; Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this

man stand here before you whole. This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:9–12). The Greek word translated here as "saved" is from a root meaning "to make whole." It is also used twice in this passage in the sense of physical healing. It is used in the same way in other New Testament passages. "My little daughter lieth at the point of death: I pray thee, come and lay thy hands on her, that she may be healed; and she shall live" (Mark 5:23).

Peter had healed a man in full public view. He had then delivered a sermon regarding the means of personal salvation. He used a single physical healing to lead many men to spiritual healing. When challenged by the religious authorities, he used the opportunity to preach to them. He used the same argument: from physical healing to spiritual healing.

B. Money as Counter-Productive

1. Not for Sale

The origin of the gift that Peter had provided to the beggar precluded a monetary payment. Peter did not use a healing technique that was available for purchase. In fact, any attempt to purchase it would place a man's soul in danger. This was Peter's warning subsequently to Simon the magician, who sought to buy the power to give the Holy Spirit. "And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, Saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost. But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money" (Acts 8:18–20).[2]

If this ability cannot be purchased with money, then the blessing conveyed by it must not be sold for money. Peter could have sold the service of physical healing, at least for a time, but in doing so, he could not have given Christ the glory. Christ had imparted this unique ability free of charge to the apostles. He did this as a means of authenticating His church, His kingdom, and His New Covenant. The miracles of healing were designed to gain attention for His representatives and their message. From the moment that Peter healed the

2. Chapter 6.

beggar, he had a ready-made audience. He could not have purchased such an audience.

The presence of a monetary payment always raises a question in the mind of a potential purchaser: "What's in it for me?" If the payment actually brings physical healing, this is a sufficient answer. A market-completed exchange ends the obligation for both parties. But Peter's message was not confined to physical healing. In fact, it was only secondarily related to physical healing. Physical healing represented spiritual healing. The same Greek word applied to both forms of healing. Peter was preaching men's need to repent—repentance exclusively through faith in Christ and His substitutionary atonement on the cross. This message required initial validation for maximum acceptance. One means of such validation was public healing. Christ had already indicated that this would be the case.

> And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth. And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house. But when the multitudes saw it, they marvelled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men (Matt. 9:2–8).

2. Money and Reciprocity

Money is the most marketable commodity.[3] It is applicable to the world of reciprocity and exchange. But the reciprocity between God and men is not based on payments from Adamic men to God. It is based on one ethically perfect man's representative payment to God, once. "But now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation" (Heb. 9:26b–28).

The use of money implies a continuing series of exchanges. Money is valuable in exchange today because men expect it to be valuable in exchange tomorrow. In contrast, an act of supernatural healing im-

3. Ludwig von Mises, *The Theory of Money and Credit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, [1912] 1953), pp. 32–33.

plies a one-time event. The healed person is expected to stay healed. He will need no return trips to an earthly physician. This is what Jesus had implied to the woman at the well. "Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:13–14).

Peter was not creating a monetary obligation on the part of the beggar. He was creating a spiritual obligation. This obligation existed independently of the healing. It is owed to God by every son of Adam. But the healing reminded the beggar and all who subsequently saw him that they owed God worship and thanks. There is always reciprocity between God and man. It begins with God's grace to man. Grace precedes law. Man is always in debt to God. The continuing grace of God though Christ is what enables a man to repay his debts, moment by moment. God takes the initiative; men respond in faith or rebellion. Peter was showing men how to respond in faith.

Conclusion

The supernatural gift of being able to heal implied an unwillingness to accept payment for healing. Peter had no money. He was a poor man—a poor man with a message. His ability to heal was a free gift from God. The economist defines "free" as being cost-free. A cost is the most valuable use foregone. Peter had not foregone any asset in order to gain this gift. His ability to heal sick people was also cost-free for him to employ. He was foregoing monetary income by not charging the beneficiaries. But this cost was more than offset by the prohibitive expense of charging for the benefit: either the loss of his gift or the loss of his soul, as he later warned Simon the magician. The potential benefit of monetary income was a potential liability. So, it cost Peter nothing to heal the man. This gift was an asset to God's kingdom. When used in public, it always drew a crowd. It publicly validated the message. In this sense, the ability to heal was better than money, both for the healer and the healed.

3

ABANDONING REAL ESTATE

And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus, Having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

ACTS 4:33–37

The theocentric principle here is the fear of God.[1]

A. At Their Feet

The apostles continued to demonstrate their authority over the church's members by means of their miraculous powers. The apostles witnessed to the authority of Christ by means of their displays of miraculous power. Church members were thereby persuaded to commit everything they owned to Christ by means of their gifts to the church.

Twice in this passage, we learn that the money from the sale of real estate was laid at the apostles' feet. This is to be taken literally. This was a ritual act of subordination to the apostles. A person transferred his assets to the church by placing the money at the feet of the leaders of the church. This would have required bowing down or kneeling. The text does not say that they tossed money at their feet. To have thrown down their money would have indicated lack of respect or even contempt. "Then Judas, which had betrayeth him,

1. Chapter 1.

when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, Saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself" (Matt. 27:3–5).

The act of subordination to the apostles was two-fold: bowing and paying. The transfer of money revealed a high degree of trust in the apostles. Real estate in Jerusalem was high priced. Presumably, it was the highest priced real estate in Israel because of the presence of the temple. The crowds coming to the temple's feasts would have bid up the price of rental property. Anyone who owned land in Jerusalem owned a highly marketable asset.

The disciples now converted their most valuable assets into money, and then gave the money to the church. This was an act symbolizing their *transfer of covenantal allegiance* from Old Covenant Israel to the church. They were announcing publicly that they had little confidence in the future of the temple and its sacrifices.

They were saying that they had no trust in a stream of income generated by either land or money. The stream of income from a home was collected mainly in the form of personal living space. The stream of income available from money was commercial. Both income streams would have led to economic independence. The disciples publicly revoked their trust in economic independence in favor of economic dependence on God, which was mediated through the trusteeship of the apostles. They were saying that they expected a stream of income from the hand of God. They were abandoning faith in the most familiar forms of revenue-generating tangible capital—land and money—in favor of reliance on intangible capital. They were exchanging tangible treasure for intangible treasure, both in history and eternity. This is what Jesus had told His listeners to do.[2]

Allegiance is a matter of trust. A person trusts the person to whom he swears allegiance. Even if he does not trust him, he nevertheless becomes dependent on him. Covenantal allegiance is formal. In the church, it is initially sealed by an oath sign: baptism. It is renewed by the Lord's Supper.[3] Laying money at the feet of the apostles was

2. Gary North, *Priorities and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Matthew*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 13.

3. Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1968).

a non-sacramental demonstration of formal allegiance. When every member who owned real estate sold his property and gave the money to the church, they set an example. This example was based on trust in God to provide an alternative stream of income. It also involved trust in the apostles to use the money in a God-honoring way.

B. The Whole Congregation

The text says that as many people who owned real estate sold it and laid the money at the feet of the apostles. This was extraordinary. There is nothing to match it in church history. I doubt that there is anything to match it in any organization's history. All of the land-owning members sold their property and gave the money to the church. The result was that no member was in economic need. This condition did not last. Paul more than once took up collections for the Jerusalem church at later dates (Rom. 15:25–26; I Cor. 16:1–3). Members of the Jerusalem church had been scattered by persecution after the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1). When they returned to Jerusalem after the persecution died down, they did not enjoy economic security. The local deacons became dependent on voluntary donations by foreign gentiles.

The membership bonds were initially very strong. The apostles distributed charitable funds. Men trusted the good judgment of the apostles. They did not believe they were being cheated. This good will did not last long. Complaints soon arose. "And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration" (Acts 6:1). The apostles then created the office of deacon to administer the funds.[4] This restored confidence.

The degree of faith in the message of the apostles was high. It extended deep into rich men's wallets. Not everyone owned real estate. Those who did sold it. They moved from the ranks of the prosperous into the ranks of the propertyless. This was a public testimony to those around them regarding their shift in faith. Presumably, the former owners moved out of their homes and into much less luxurious quarters. They had given up not only their homes but the investment income that a sale price would have provided. They were not just switching from one tangible capital asset to another; they were giving

4. Chapter 5.

away their tangible capital. This must have seemed utterly foolish to their peers. Their peers must have asked their departing neighbors why. Why would anyone with substantial assets do such a thing? This was an opportunity for witnessing to their faith in Jesus.

The apostles healed sick people. Church members with real estate money sold it. Church members without money did not suffer economically. All of this testified in a powerful way to the presence of a new order within the old order. This was no monastic order. These were not Essenes. They did not move out into the desert to live a life of poverty. They remained residents of the most important city in Israel. Those who had owned real estate moved downward economically and socially. They had pulled up their social and economic roots, but they did not pull up their geographical roots. Not yet. Not until the persecution began.

The Jerusalem church was living in expectation of a major change. Part of this expectation was eschatological. Jesus had warned: "And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judaea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto. For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled" (Luke 21:20–22). Selling real estate when the signs appeared would not be wise. Better to sell before they appeared. How much before? They could not be sure. But all of them did sell their real estate holdings, so we can be confident that they had abandoned faith in the income streams produced by local land. As it turned out, they were able to leave the city less expensively when the persecution began, for they were not leaving behind valuable but immobile property. They were not forfeiting valuable land.

C. The End of the Old Order

In the days when Nebuchadnezzar's troops marched against Jerusalem, a relative of the prophet Jeremiah came to him with an offer. He asked if Jeremiah would buy the family property. Jeremiah did. He paid silver for it. "Behold, Hanameel the son of Shallum thine uncle shall come unto thee, saying, Buy thee my field that is in Anathoth: for the right of redemption is thine to buy it. So Hanameel mine uncle's son came to me in the court of the prison according to the word of the Lord, and said unto me, Buy my field, I pray thee, that is in Anathoth, which is in the country of Benjamin: for the right of inher-

itance is thine, and the redemption is thine; buy it for thyself. Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD. And I bought the field of Hanameel my uncle's son, that was in Anathoth, and weighed him the money, even seventeen shekels of silver" (Jer. 32:7–9). In giving up money for land in a time of invasion, Jeremiah was making a public statement. He was announcing his faith that God would someday bring the people, or their sons, back into the land. He was extending his heirs' stake in the future of Israel by purchasing land.

In the months after the ascension of Christ into heaven, the apostles adopted Hanameel's vision of the Israel's future. But they did not take the money and run. They took the money, distributed it to poorer members, and prepared the members to run, which they soon did (Acts 8:1). It was clear that the apostles had no confidence in the future of Jerusalem. The members understood this, and they acted rationally to this perception. They sold their land. This was a public demonstration of their belief that Old Covenant Israel's days were numbered. God had put Old Covenant Israel into the balance, and it was found wanting. The handwriting was not on the wall—the temple's wall—but it was coming. He who had eyes to see sold his land. He thereby broke his allegiance to the Old Covenant order. This was a negative confession.

The next question was this: What would replace Old Covenant Israel? The answer was the church (Matt. 21:43). This is why they gave their money to the apostles. This was a positive confession that matched their negative confession. They understood the reality of the political slogan, "You can't beat something with nothing." They had a place to put their trust: heaven. "Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:33–34).[5] The apostles represented heaven.

D. Outside Support

Paul later raised funds for the church at Jerusalem. This was after the scattering (Acts 8:1) and the missionary activities of those who were scattered. "Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). It appears that sometime in the 50's, the Jerusalem church fell on hard times. Sometime in the mid-

5. Gary North, *Treasure and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 26.

40's, there was a famine. It took place during the reign of Claudius. There are independent records regarding this famine that identify the mid-40's as its date. "And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 11:27–30). This fund-raising was for Judea in general, not just Jerusalem.

Paul's epistles to the Corinthians appealed for funds to send to the Jerusalem church. These epistles were probably written in the early to mid-50s. It would be unwise to draw any connection between the church's pre-persecution practice of common property and its need for outside support over two decades later. We do not know when the practice of holding property in common ceased. We also do not know if most of those who fled the city in Acts 8 returned after the persecution died down. Those who had fled had no real estate to return to. Perhaps many of them failed to return.

By having sold their real estate, they were ready to leave the city on short notice. This was wise, given Jesus' prophecy regarding the days of vengeance. It was also providential, given the severity of the persecution after the death of Stephen. The system of common property gave security to converts who were in poverty or who fell on hard times. But there can be little doubt that the practice retarded capital formation among the brethren. When men cannot establish legal claims to capital assets or the income generated by these assets, they are generally unwilling to take the risks associated with capital formation.

Conclusion

When every member who owned real estate sold it and gave the money to the apostles as trustees, the church received more than money. It received publicity. When people give their money away, they exchange one future for another. This is well understood, both by those making the exchange and those viewing it. When men exchange their futures, they have already exchanged their visions of the future.

What took place in Jerusalem was a miracle. Jesus had said, "it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man

to enter into the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:25). Only the direct intervention of God can overcome this resistance. "And they that heard it said, Who then can be saved? And he said, The things which are impossible with men are possible with God" (Luke 18:26–27).[6] Some of the church's members possessed real estate. They were not poor. Some of them may have been rich. They marched through the eye of the needle.

6. *Ibid.*, ch. 43.

4

IN DEFENSE OF PRIVATE PROPERTY

But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, And kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God. And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things. And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him.

ACTS 5:1–6

The theocentric principle here is the omniscience of God: sovereignty, point one of the biblical covenant.[1] A man and his wife attempted to deceive the church regarding the degree of their commitment to God. God knew the truth. He brought direct sanctions against them for lying to the church. It is foolish to try to deceive God.

A. A Good Reputation

Ananias and his wife saw that members of the Jerusalem church were selling their real estate and giving the sale price to the church. To do this was considered sacrificial. There were positive social sanctions associated with this dedication. It was considered an honorable thing to do.

1. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 1. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, [1980] 2010), ch. 1.

Ananias and his wide decided to buy themselves respectability at a discount price. They would deceive their peers. They would sell their land, secretly retain some of the proceeds, give the remainder to the church, and bask in the glory. They would gain the reputation of being sacrificial in their devotion to God. This would include a reputation for trusting God to care for them. But if bad times came, they would have money in reserve. They would not be completely dependent on God. They would also be eligible to receive financial support from the church.

1. Revelation

The problem with this strategy was the fact that God revealed their deception to Peter. God did this with prophets, but there were few prophets in Israel. Jesus had been a prophet. More than this: He had been the prophet predicted by Moses.

> The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken; According to all that thou desiredst of the LORD thy God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. And the LORD said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him (Deut. 18:15–19).

In his second sermon, Peter had cited this passage and applied it to Jesus: "For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people. Yea, and all the prophets from Samuel and those that follow after, as many as have spoken, have likewise foretold of these days" (Acts 3:22–24).

The couple had heard who Jesus was. They had joined the church on this basis. But they did not recognize that the leaders of the church would possess the prophetic power of revelation. They should have known this. Peter had miraculously healed the crippled man (Acts 3:7).[2] This gift of healing was a mark of a true prophet. Jesus had

2. Chapter 2.

healed many people in the same way. The couple should have understood that the leaders of the Jerusalem church were apostles. One or more of these apostles would be given access to information that was not available to men under normal circumstances.

They did not care what God knew. They cared only what men knew. They did not take God's wrath into consideration. They took men's opinions into consideration. They were man-centered in their frame of reference. They wanted to please men at the expense of pleasing God. Paul later warned against this. To seek to please men is to abandon servanthood. "For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ" (Gal. 1:10).

2. Social Approval

There was a strong element of peer pressure to transfer family-owned property to the church, which is why Ananias and Sapphira decided to sell their land and give part of the money to the church. They wanted to be regarded as team players. Members of the team in Jerusalem pooled their resources. But there was no threat of compulsion. Peter's words made this clear. No one had to donate all of his goods to the church in order to be a member in good standing. Peter asked Ananias: "Why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart?" He did not expect an answer. Ananias would not live long enough to answer. Peter regarded their deception as satanic. It was an attack on the integrity of the apostles, the integrity of the church, and ultimately the integrity of God.

What was so wrong about their act? People are often untruthful in this world, but God does not immediately execute them. What was unique about this act of deception? Peter said, "thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God." It had to do with church authority. They had lied to God through the church. They had tried to elevate themselves in the eyes of the church. Why did they care what church members thought? It had to do with the church's claims to represent God in history. The church could not provide social acceptance among Jews. What other benefits could it provide? Perhaps they wanted an economic safety net, which the church seemed to be able to provide. But this would continue only if new converts with assets continued to join and also continued to give their wealth to the church. What did they expect to gain? To some degree, they were seeking approval from God through the approval of other church members. By seeking

to deceive the members who represented God, they were seeking to deceive God. This is what Peter told them.

Why would anyone expect to gain the blessings of God while deceiving God? Why would anyone expect to gain the approval of an omniscient God through church members who do not possess such omniscience? Why would anyone want the social approval of people who are so easily deceived? Ananias had not been thinking straight.

B. Voluntary Charity

Peter challenged Ananias: "But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power?" The land had been theirs. After it was sold, the money was theirs. They had derived benefits from the land. They could have derived benefits from the money. They recognized this, which is why they retained a portion of the sale price. Peter said that there was nothing wrong with their desire to keep these benefits in reserve. What was wrong was their attempt to deceive other church members regarding their degree of sacrifice and their degree of trust in God.

Peter's challenge to Ananias revealed a New Testament principle of ownership. In the midst of an unprecedented program of voluntary charity within the church at Jerusalem, there was still a commitment to the principle of private ownership. The apostles' practice of holding property in trust for members of the local church was not based on any principle of compulsion. No one's membership was at risk for refusing to donate. The apostles were not threatening any property-owning member with the loss of access to the Lord's Supper.

Peter asked rhetorically, "Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power?" This was the basically same rhetorical question asked by the land owner in Jesus' parable of the hired hands. "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?" (Matt. 20:15a). It was on the basis of this principle of private ownership that Jesus used this parable to teach about the sovereignty of God in making the offer of eternal life.[3] Peter here reaffirmed the same principle of private ownership.

Socialism is the rejection of the private ownership of the means of production. This is why it is impossible to prove the case for socialism

3. Gary North, *Priorities and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Matthew*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 40.

by the practice of the church in Jerusalem. There was an underlying commitment to economic equality through voluntary charity, but this has nothing to do with socialism. Voluntarism has nothing to do with socialism. The civil government in a socialist economy confiscates privately owned capital. This reduces the former capital owner's ability to exercise charity. Socialism substitutes the threat of physical violence for voluntarism. Socialism sends the tax collector to the door of the property owner. He demands the transfer of ownership to the state. If the property owner refuses to submit, the tax collector sends the police, who are armed, to take whatever the tax collector demands. Socialism is based on the threat of physical compulsion.

Peter's statement to Ananias stands as a barrier to the socialist's invocation on behalf of his cause of the Jerusalem church's practice of common property. The Jerusalem church's members possessed property. This is why they were able to create a system of common ownership. There was a free market for capital goods. Capital had been privately owned in ancient Israel, and it was privately owned in the Roman Empire. There was a capital market. Therefore, members could sell their less liquid capital assets for money, and then give this money to the apostles as trustees.

C. Sapphira

Ananias was guilty of trying to deceive God. Was his wife also guilty? Peter would soon determine this through a verbal examination. "And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in. And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much. Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out. Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband. And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things" (Acts 5:7–11).

Peter probably knew that she was a co-conspirator with her husband. Nevertheless, he allowed her to condemn herself. He conducted an investigation. This was for her sake as much as for the church's. The event taught members that God would defend His church through the imposition of negative sanctions. Peter knew the nature of the sanction in this case: death. When Sapphira affirmed

her husband's lie, she condemned herself to his fate. No wonder that "great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things."

The church was slowly being substituted for Old Covenant Israel as the representative of God's kingdom. Jesus had told the Jews, "Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matt. 21:43).

The church did not possess any authority to impose negative physical sanctions. It could restrict a person from the sacraments, but it did not possess the sword of civil government. God, however, did possess a sword. By publicly confirming Peter's verbal judgment against Ananias and Sapphira, God validated Peter's office.

D. New Sanctions, New Covenant

The text continues: "And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch" (v. 12). God was validating the apostles' authority by means of visible sanctions. These sanctions were part of the New Covenant. Without sanctions, both positive and negative, there is no covenant.[4]

Neither civil magistrates nor church officers are given the ability to read men's minds. To build any system of government on any leader's possession of such an ability is to misunderstand the nature of New Covenant authority. Some of the apostles sometimes possessed this unique power. This marked the transfer from the Old Covenant to the New. The New Covenant needed validation. God provided this. But once the Old Covenant was visibly ended, which took place at the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, miracles ceased to be available on demand to church officers. This is not to deny that some miracles do take place. But church officers do not possess them automatically upon accession to office. Civil magistrates in Israel never did possess such power as part of their office.

The socialist must assume for the state the power to read men's minds on a scale never possessed by the apostles. The socialist planning board must match aggregate supply and demand. This means that board members must find a way for would-be producers and would-be customers to coordinate their plans. Central planners must

4. Sutton, *That You May Prosper*, ch. 4.

first assess which customer demands are legitimate, meaning beneficial for the entire community. Then they must determine who in society can meet this demand most efficiently. Then they must devise a system of predictable sanctions, positive and negative, to persuade producers and customers to consummate an exchange of services. The socialist must presume a God-like omniscience by the members of the various central planning boards. Their bureaucratic plans must be jointly coordinated somehow, so that they are mutually consistent. Then these plans must be implemented. The socialist must therefore also assume a God-like omnipotence on the part of civil magistrates in enforcing the plans issued by the central planning boards.

The New Covenant does not authorize such powers of observation and enforcement to civil government. Even in the case of the early church, the apostles did not rely on church authority to enforce their miraculous ability to know men's secrets. They relied on God to enforce directly their miracle-based judgments.

Conclusion

The judicial case of Ananias and Sapphira stands as a defense of private property. Peter invoked the principle of private property in condemning them. It was their attempt to deceive God, Peter said, that was satanic, not their ownership of property.

The socialist who seeks moral justification for socialism's ideal of economic equality should not use the example of common property in the Jerusalem church. The socialist who does invoke the practice of the Jerusalem church has not come to grips with Peter's words of condemnation against Ananias. "Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power?"

5

THE DIACONATE

And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.

ACTS 6:1–4

The theocentric focus of this passage is God in His office as the defender of the poor. This is point two of the biblical covenant: hierarchy.[1]

A. Competition for Resources

The text tells us that there were divisions in the Jerusalem church. These divisions were based on language and culture. The general categories were Jew and Greek. These were Greek-speaking Jews, also called Hellenes.[2] Presumably, they were men who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and Pentecost, and had been converted to faith in Jesus either by Peter's preaching or by hearing the gospel in their own language, when the Holy Spirit led to the disciples' speaking in tongues, which had been a miraculous though temporary

1. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 2. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, [1980] 2010), ch. 2.

2. This was different from Hellenists, who were Jews who had adopted Greek philosophy.

reversal of the curse of the tower of Babel. They now believed that the widows of Hellenes were not receiving their fair share of the charitable resources of the church. They began to murmur.

Murmuring is an early manifestation of institutional conflict. It is an unofficial form of complaining. Murmurers are complaining against the system, meaning the way things are. The presumption of the murmurer is that if things were done differently, the world would be a better place.

What was the basis of their complaint? Visible representatives of one identifiable subgroup of church members were not receiving the same proportion of the church's charitable resources. The text does not say who was in immediate authority over the distribution of resources to the widows. Presumably, it was the apostles as a group. Church members had sold their homes and lands, placing the proceeds at the feet of the apostles. The apostles were acting as trustees for these funds.

Who were these Grecians? They were Greek-speaking converts to Christian faith. Some may previously have been pagans who had been doing business in Jerusalem. Others may have been converts to Old Covenant religion, called proselytes. Others were Jews who had come to Jerusalem from Greek-speaking provinces. "And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). What were these men doing in Jerusalem? The most likely guess is that they were involved in foreign trade. They may have been skilled craftsmen. Under Rome's authority, men had free access to the cities of the Empire. There was great mobility.

The identifying marks of distinction were linguistic fluency, either in Greek or Hebrew. The Greek-speaking members were sufficiently numerous that there were impoverished Greek-speaking widows on the membership rolls of the church. The Greeks regarded the apostles' treatment of these widows as representative of how the Greeks were being treated generally by Jews. Jews had a disparaging view of gentiles. The Greeks did not want to be regarded as subordinate to Hebrew-speaking, circumcised church members. They regarded distribution of funds to widows was representative of how they were regarded by the leadership. They believed they were being discriminated against.

B. The Division of Labor

The practice of the church had been to help all of the members who were in need. "And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need" (Acts 2:45). "Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold. And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need" (Acts 4:34–35). So, in the early weeks of the church's existence, everyone in need received aid. Now there was a change. The murmuring began.

The apostles did not confirm or deny the accusation against them They responded by creating a new office in the church, which later was called "deacon." Those men who held this office would administer the charitable funds. The apostles said they were too involved in the preaching of the gospel to spend time in waiting tables, which was a phrase symbolizing charitable work. Charitable work they saw as a lesser calling to preaching.

The apostles had limited resources of time. They had to allocate their time among competing uses. Low on their list of priorities was the administration of the church's charitable funds. They were saying that saving souls through preaching is more important than caring for widows. Others could do this more mundane task. The number of men who could faithfully serve as deacons was greater than the number of those who had lawful access to the office of apostle.

The division of labor had now begun within the church's hierarchy. The apostles would henceforth do the work of evangelism and church oversight, and the deacons would distribute funds to the poor. The deacons would report to the apostles. This system of hierarchy had two immediate advantages. First, it relieved the apostles of the burden of overseeing church charity. Second, it established an intermediate agency that would become responsible for giving away the funds. This would make deacons the first line of defense against future murmuring about widows. They could sort out the problems. If they could not satisfy the murmurers, then the apostles could step in and deal with the dispute. This magnified the office of apostle.

C. Legal Claims vs. Moral Claims

The money being used to care for widows was supposedly available to every member's widow on the basis of her need. The murmurers

were arguing their subgroup's widows were not being aided to the same degree that the widows of Hebrew-speakers were. This was unfair, they implied.

Fairness became an issue because the beneficiaries had no legal title to the charitable funds. There was more demand for these funds by non-owners than there was supply of these funds by the apostles. The apostles had gained control over these funds because of their promise to care for the poor. This promise was not being fulfilled to the satisfaction of the critics. The issue of fairness arose because of the structure of ownership. The Hellenes believed that their group's widows had a moral claim on the funds, even though they did not have a legal claim. By collecting money in terms of a moral goal—helping impoverished church members—the apostles had exposed themselves to criticism from those who believed that they had a moral claim to the money. This was not an insurance contract, yet the system functioned analogously to such a contract. There was a crucial difference, however: a contract is a document that is legally enforceable in a court. The apostles' implied arrangement was not a legal contract.

A moral claim is difficult to define and describe, which is one reason why moral claims are not formally agreed to in advance by participants in an institution. Written contracts do not apply well to cases governed by moral criteria. Acceptable performance is difficult to specify. A theory of an implied contract may be offered retroactively to justify moral claims to scarce resources. The terms of implied contracts are vague or highly complex. The moral principles that supposedly govern these implied contracts may be disputed. This is why disputes over moral claims to scarce economic resources are not easily settled to the satisfaction of all those who make these claims.

The murmuring began because there was no way for the Hellenes to establish a legal claim to church funds on behalf of their subgroup's widows. The Hellenes did not own these funds. The funds were owned by the church. The apostles administered these funds on behalf of widows and other moral claimants. In dealing with this problem, the Hellenes faced a barrier: fear. The fatal experience of Ananias and Sapphira had put fear in the hearts of church members (Acts 5:5, 11).[3] A direct confrontation with the apostles was viewed as too risky. So, the critics began to murmur. They criticized the results of the distribution, but they did not directly challenge those officers in charge of this distribution.

3. Chapter 4.

The issue facing the apostles was two-fold: the moral foundation of their trusteeship and their efficiency in performing their duties. They did not immediately address the moral issue of which subgroup deserved what. They dealt with their problem institutionally by creating a new office in the local church. They delegated responsibility over the distribution of charitable funds. Members had delegated this authority to the apostles when they laid money at the apostles' feet. The apostles now shifted part of this responsibility downward.

The apostles did not say that the widows of Hellenes were not morally entitled to a share of the church's funds. They also did not admit that they were at fault morally. They did imply that their own handling of the matter had been inefficient. They proposed an institutional solution: the creation of a bureaucracy of specialists in waiting on tables.

D. Free Market Competition

In a free market, competition for resources takes the form of a giant, highly complex auction. Men bid against each other for the legal right to use scarce economic resources. They offer assets that legally they now possess, or think they will possess, in exchange for assets that they hope to possess. Owners of resources compete against each other economically in order to gain legal title to a different mix of resources.

A free market social order rests on a legal system that enforces legal titles to resources. Competition for resources shifts from moral claims to legal claims. Adjudication shifts from individual violence to institutional violence. Decisions by civil courts are backed up by the monopoly over violence that is lawfully possessed by the civil government. In order to reduce violence in men's competition for scarce resources, the legal system enforces legal title and voluntary contracts.

Vengeance is God's monopoly. "To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste" (Deut. 32:35). "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19).[4] God has delegated a portion of His monopoly of violence to the civil government (Rom. 13:1–7).[5] He has done this in order to increase social peace. Legal predictabil-

4. Gary North, *Cooperation and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Romans*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2001] 2012), ch. 10.

5. *Ibid.*, ch. 11.

ity is a means of increasing social peace. So is legal title to property.

A moral claim to scarce resources may be legitimate in God's eyes. A moral claim may be granted by God to a non-owner because of the non-owner's weakness. In Old Covenant Israel, the non-owners who were most often singled out by God as deserving of special consideration by owners were widows, orphans, and strangers. Nevertheless, God distinguishes moral claims from legal claims. Under the Mosaic law, God granted very few legal claims to members of these three categories. He granted to property owners the moral right to determine which members of these categories they would help. Land owners determined which poor people would gain access to their fields as gleaners. The example of Boaz and Ruth was representative (Ruth 2).[6] Money owners determined which poverty-stricken Israelites would receive zero-interest charitable loans (Deut. 15).[7]

The locus of final authority to enforce moral claims against legal claims remains with God. He brings positive historical sanctions for obedience. "If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother: But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth. Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the Lord against thee, and it be sin unto thee. Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the Lord thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou puttest thine hand unto" (Deut. 15:7–10). He brings negative historical sanctions for disobedience. "Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless" (Ex. 22:21–24).[8]

6. Gary North, *Disobedience and Defeat: An Economic Commentary on the Historical Books* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), ch. 9.

7. Gary North, *Inheritance and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1999] 2012), ch. 36.

8. Gary North, *Authority and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Exodus* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), Part 3, *Tools of Dominion* (1990), ch. 49.

A property owner has a legal right to exclude others from the use of certain resources. He announces, "This is mine." Covenantally speaking, this means: "God has delegated to me legal control over this asset." To challenge this claim successfully in a court of law, the critic must show that God has not delegated such ownership to him, or that God has placed limits on the exclusive use of the property by the existing legal owner.

Conclusion

The apostles faced a series of problems. First, their claim of ownership as trustees was based on an implied moral claim: they would use the money to help impoverished church members. This claim implied equal access to these funds by all poor widows of church members. Second, the apostles faced time constraints. To administer the funds properly would take time. Third, there was a division in the church based on linguistic-cultural differences.

Their solution was to create a new ecclesiastical office: deacon. This added a layer of bureaucracy in between church members and trustees. The apostles retained their authority to adjudicate disputes, but they passed down to the deacons the task of settling these issues initially. This took advantage of the division of labor.

6

THINGS THAT MONEY CANNOT BUY

And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, Saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost. But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity. Then answered Simon, and said, Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me.

ACTS 8:18–24

The theocentric basis of this incident was the free grace of God in delivering men from the bondage of sin. The Holy Spirit uses men for His purposes. They are not to attempt to use Him for theirs. This is a matter of hierarchy, point two of the biblical covenant.[1]

A. Simon the Magician

This incident took place in Samaria. In Samaria, there were traces of biblical religion. The Samaritans refused to worship at the temple. They knew of God and His promises, but they would not subordinate themselves to the Jews. All this was about to change. Jesus had told the Samaritan woman at the well, "Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour

1. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 2. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, [1980] 2010), ch. 2.

cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:22–24). Now God's Spirit had come. He was transforming men. Simon recognized this. He wanted a large role in this method of transformation. He had the money to buy in early, or so he imagined.

There had already been an effective work of evangelism in Samaria through Philip's preaching.

> Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed. And there was great joy in that city. But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries. But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done (Acts 8:5–13).

Simon had been a sorcerer. He had been persuaded by Philip's message of salvation. He had submitted to baptism, but the Holy Spirit had not come upon him at the time of this baptism."Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost" (Acts 8:14–17). This indicates that the giving of the Holy Ghost was not then simultaneous upon conversion. The Samaritans were in the same condition as the disciples had been before Pentecost.

This separation between salvation and the giving of the Holy Ghost continued in the gentile world.

> And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples,

> He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied. And all the men were about twelve (Acts 19:1–7).

When Simon saw that Peter and John had the ability to impart the Holy Ghost through the laying on of hands, he decided that he wanted this power. He offered to buy it from them. This also indicates that Simon did not think that the apostles were using tricks to perform this transfer. He believed that the power was real, and that it was for sale.

Peter's response to Simon was immediate and harsh. Such power was not for sale, he told Simon. "But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money." Simon's money was earthly. So was his soul, Peter implied. It was not just Simon's body that was at risk. His soul was at risk. The issue was ethical rebellion. "Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity."

B. Repentance Unto Salvation

Simon had committed such a great sin that Peter cursed him. Simon had imagined that the power possessed by the apostles was for sale. He imagined that God serves on command of certain men. The apostles must have had some sort of power over God's Spirit, Simon concluded. This was not trickery; it was supernatural. Simon wanted to share in this supernatural ability.

Peter warned him that his soul was at risk. Simon had publicly testified his faith in Philip's message of redemption by submitting to baptism. He had thereby brought himself under the authority of God and God's church. But when Simon saw that the apostles had the ability to impart the Holy Spirit, he sought to buy the ability. He was not interested in receiving the Holy Spirit personally. He did not

ask to receive the Holy Spirit. He was interested only in possessing the ability to grant the Holy Spirit to selected believers. He wanted to be in charge of administering the Holy Spirit. He was not seeking to become an agent of the Holy Spirit. Simon's hope was the hope of every seeker after power. He wants to use power for his purposes without becoming ensnared by it.

To receive the Holy Spirit meant to come under God's hierarchy directly. It meant submission to God. It also meant submission to the apostles. Simon was not interested in submitting. He was interested in gaining submission. What was he really after? Power? Probably. Holy office? Yes. But he did not recognize that a man who is under God's covenant is under God's covenant law and its sanctions. Peter warned him that he had broken God's law and was now facing eternal sanctions. Simon had been baptized, which is a New Covenant oath sign.[2] He was therefore formally under the stipulations of the covenant.[3] He could not escape its sanctions.[4]

Why did he imagine that the ability to impart the Holy Spirit was for sale? Why did he think that the apostles could transfer this ability to him or anyone? Simon was in the grip of an idea, namely, that God is on call to man. If a man could somehow learn the secret of gaining control over God, he could achieve great things. It was worth a lot of money to Simon to gain this power.

The text says that Simon had previously possessed great influence locally. "To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God." He had been seen by Samaritans as a man of God. Yet Peter made it clear to him that Simon was no man of God. He was under God's wrath. The worst thing possible was going to happen to him if he refused to repent.

Simon believed Peter. This is additional evidence that he knew that the apostles possessed supernatural power, not just the ability to deceive people. He was not trying to purchase the secret of deceiving people. He was trying to purchase supernatural authority over a manifestation of God in history. Simon wanted more power, more public acclaim for his mediatory position between God and man.

Peter recognized the evil intent behind this request. He warned Simon that he was risking God's judgment. Simon immediately asked

2. Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1968).

3. Sutton, *That You May Prosper*, ch. 3.

4. *Ibid.*, ch. 4.

Peter to pray to Peter's God. He saw in Peter a man with mediatory authority. God paid attention to Peter. Peter could pray on Simon's behalf.

Simon understood prayer. He understood that prayer is different from the power to work miracles, including the miracle of imparting the Holy Spirit. Prayer was a request to God. He who prayed on another person's behalf could have his prayer answered. Simon did not trust his own standing with God. He wanted Peter to intercede for him. He did not offer to pay Peter for offering up such a prayer. He understood that the ability to get prayers answered was not for sale. He did not assume that there was a market for effective prayers. What Peter had just said to him had frightened him. He did want to compound his sin. He wanted forgiveness.

We are not told what Simon did next. "And they, when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, returned to Jerusalem, and preached the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans" (v. 25). But what Simon attempted to do was remembered for centuries. The term *simony* refers to the practice of buying a high ecclesiastical office. This practice became acceptable during the Middle Ages. It was a way for the Papacy to raise funds.

C. The Magician's Bargain

Why did Simon initially think that such power was for sale? There is no New Testament record of anyone else who made such an offer to the apostles. Simon must have had knowledge of supernatural power's being sold by its possessors. This power would only have been available through demonic activity. Satan had tempted Christ by challenging Him to purchase the kingdoms of this world from Satan.[5] This offer was based on a lie, however: Satan did not possess lawful title to these kingdoms. Simon believed that others had purchased supernatural abilities from existing holders. He wanted to make a similar arrangement. Simon was sinful because he imagined that such power was for sale by the apostles. His sin was not skepticism; it was commercialism.

Skepticism is more common today. There are modern illusionists who argue that all of the miracles performed by people in the Bible were either illusions or events that did not take place. I once exchanged a series of letters with a Christian who was a professional

5. Gary North, *Priorities and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Matthew*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 3.

illusionist. He insisted that Satan does not possess such supernatural abilities. He went so far as to argue that the contest between Moses and Pharaoh's magicians involved illusions on both sides. He denied that the rods had become snakes. The text says that this transformation did take place, but he insisted that we must not take these words literally. I pointed out to him that he had adopted the materialistic worldview of skeptics. His methodology was rationalist. He was interpreting the Bible in terms of rationalism's explanation of cause and effect, not the Bible's view. I told him that he was doing what the illusionist and rationalist skeptic James Randi does with every biblical reference to God's supernatural manifestations in history. He refused to admit this. He preferred to interpret the Bible in terms of what he and his professional peers can do, yet he would not accept the suggestion that he had adopted presuppositions that are hostile to biblical supernaturalism. He would not acknowledge that the methodological broom that he was using in his attempt to sweep away the Egyptian magicians' serpents could also be used, and is being used, by his peers in their' attempt to sweep away his God.

Simon was not under an illusionist's illusion. He had used sorcery to gain a reputation for himself as a man of God. He did not want to lose this reputation. Philip had performed miracles. Now the senior officers of the church had arrived, and they could transfer the Holy Spirit to others. Here was power worth paying for.

Peter told him that the suggestion that such a commercial transaction with God is even possible testified to Simon's sinfulness. "For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity." Simon was still under spiritual bondage. God is not in the business of establishing some sort of commercial franchise for the sale of supernatural power. Man can offer nothing to God in exchange for such ability. The ability to lay on hands was God's gift to the holder, not a means of enriching him. This ability was not transferrable on request.

Simon had misunderstood both the purpose and the basis of such power. The apostles had been given miraculous powers in order to testify to the power of God to regenerate men. The apostles also had the power to confirm this regeneration by the laying on of hands. The Holy Spirit was added to regeneration. Philip had not demonstrated such an ability. The possession this power was indicative of high ecclesiastical office. It later confirmed Paul's ministry as an apostle. "And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came

on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied" (Acts 19:6). Simon wanted this power.

What he imagined was that there is a shortcut to power and therefore to ecclesiastical authority. In one sense, this had been Adam's belief, too. Adam believed he could attain a power that God possessed by eating from the forbidden tree. He was unwilling to wait for God to give him lawful access. He was in a hurry. Simon also hoped to speed up his rise in the ranks, from a new convert to an apostle. Money was his hoped-for means of promotion.

In men's affairs, money can speed up processes. There is a familiar trade-off between time and money. To save money takes time, and vice versa. The value of any income stream is discounted by the prevailing rate of interest, which is a payment for the use of an income-generating asset over time.[6] The higher men's time-preference is, meaning the lower their future-orientation, the more they are willing to pay to buy instant gratification. They discount the future sharply. This was Simon's weakness. He was unwilling to wait for God's gift. He wanted the marks of high office, and did not want to wait.

This is the magician's worldview. It is also Satan's. Satan is short of time. Time is running out on him. He knows that his ability to disrupt the kingdom of God is temporally bounded. He cannot afford to be a long-run planner. He can plan for a much longer run than most men do, but compared to God, Satan is a short-term thinker.

Conclusion

Simon believed that he could attain the power of an apostle by purchasing this power. He may have imagined that the office would come along with the power. He did not say this; he asked only for the power. Peter warned him that his soul was in danger for suggesting such a transaction. There are some things that money cannot buy, and the power of apostles was one of them. Not only was Simon unable to rise to apostolic office by purchasing its power, he was at risk eternally for thinking that he could.

It is an error to believe that all power derives from nature. It is also an error to believe that he who possesses power can sell it. Some forms of power are nontransferable. For example, personal skills and attributes that produce power are not transferrable. So are supernatural powers that God endows on some men in order to extend God's

6. Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1949), ch. 19.

kingdom. It is not true that everything has a market price. The things that the Bible says are most valuable in this world and the next do not have a price that men can afford to pay. "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matt. 16:24–26).[7]

7. North, *Priorities and Dominion*, ch. 35.

7

CHURCHES THAT SHARE

Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul: And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch. And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

ACTS 11:25–30

The theocentric principle here was the fatherhood of God among believers: point two of the biblical covenant.[1] Brothers help brothers in times of need.

A. Confirmation of Gentile Faith

Antioch was a gentile city, the capital of Roman Syria in Asia Minor. Barnabas went there after he had found Paul. He knew that Paul had been called to preach the gospel to the gentiles. The two of them remained in Antioch for a year. The city had a large population of Jews, possibly as many as 45,000.[2] This explains why Jewish prophets came to warn them about a coming famine, which took place around A.D. 45.[3]

1. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 4. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, 2010), ch. 4.

2. Elizabeth McNamer, "Antioch: Trailblazer of Christianity," *Scripture from Scratch* (May 2002).

3. "Agabus." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, May 3, 2012; en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agabus.

The text indicates that the church at Antioch collected money to send to the church in Judea even before the famine struck. This indicates great faith in the prophecy. It also indicates that the gentiles in Antioch regarded the converted Jews in Judea as their brethren.

Paul wrote of the breaking down of the middle wall of partition between Jews and gentiles in Christ. "For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us" (Eph. 2:14). This was an early example of this principle in action. When men sacrifice money for a principle, they believe in the principle. Here, early in the history of the church, the gentiles took the initiative. They acknowledged their faith in Christ by sending money to Jews who also had announced their faith in Christ.

They trusted Barnabas and Saul to deliver the money. They had been taught by both men for some time. Their trust in the message led to their trust in the men. The mark of this trust was their transfer of money to them.

B. Faith in the Future

The church at Antioch had confidence in God. The prophet Agabus had warned them of a famine to come soon. He did not say that it would only strike Judea. On the contrary, he said that it would hit the Roman world. The response of the Antiochan church was to take money that could have been used to buy food, in advance, to be used by the local congregation, and to give this money to Paul and Barnabas. The local church believed Agabus. Yet the members did not think of protecting themselves first. They thought about other Christians who might be harder hit.

As the capital city of the region, Antioch would receive special consideration from the Roman state. This would reduce the risk of famine for members of the local church. They made an estimate of comparative risk for the two regions and concluded that the church in Judea was at greater risk. So, they decided to donate money to the Judean church.

Famine was nothing to be taken lightly. The modern West has not faced a famine since the Irish potato crop failure in the late 1840s. We have forgotten what it means to be without basic foods. We have not lived under such conditions unless we have lived in a war zone. The prophecy of famine would have created fear in most people's hearts in Antioch. Nevertheless, they gave money to help the Jewish church. The text does not indicate that the prophets from Jerusalem had

asked for money. Paul and Barnabas, not the visiting prophets, took the money back to the church in Jerusalem. This indicates that the church at Antioch made the decision to donate the money later on.

Their faith in God's providence was remarkable. They trusted the Jewish prophets. They believed that these men were telling the truth. God really was going to impose a famine on the region. They also trusted God. They believed that God would protect them. He had sent prophets to warn them, so He would protect them when the famine struck.

The prophets had come to help the church. They presumably had warned the Jerusalem church. They had set aside time and travel expenses to journey to Antioch to warn the gentile church. The gentiles in the church of Antioch responded by sending money back to Judea. A bond of faith in God and His providence united the two churches. Money was the visible mark of this bond.

Conclusion

The generosity of the church at Antioch was evidence that Paul's message of reconciliation had begun to be taken seriously in the gentile Christian world. But the prophets from Jerusalem also shared this faith. Otherwise, why would they have come all the way to Antioch to warn the gentiles?

The money was the testimony to this new faith. It marked the commitment of Christians to support one another, care for one another, in times of trouble. A new faith had appeared, and it crossed geographical and racial boundaries. They had preached reconciliation. Now they put their money where their mouths were. Their faith was real.

8

OCCUPATION AND CALLING

And because he was one if the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers.

ACTS 18:3

A. "What Do You Do?"

Protestants refer to Paul as the Apostle Paul. Roman Catholics refer to him as St. Paul. No one refers to his as Paul the tentmaker. Yet that was what he was.

In the United States, one of the first questions that one man asks another man after their formal introduction is this: "What do you do?" That means: "What do you do for a living?" This refers to a person's occupation. To begin a relationship, American men assess their relationship by means of information regarding their income-generating work.

There are specialists in marketing who train their students in the 30-second "elevator" presentation: a brief, carefully crafted summary of what they do, meaning what they sell. The goal of this presentation is to stimulate a follow-up contact, which in turn will lead to a sales presentation at some point. The elevator is used as the example of a very brief encounter: the time between floors. From the time the elevator's doors close to the time it opens, and one of them steps out of the elevator, the skilled student should have made his presentation, along with a follow-up action step. He hands the other person his business card.

If anyone had asked Paul "What do you do?" what would he have said? "I'm an apostle of Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God." Or "I am a messenger from God, bringing the good news of eternal

life through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Or this: "I make tents." The answer would have depended on the circumstances of the meeting. It is quite conceivable to imagine that Paul would have answered "I make tents" if the person had just met him at a restaurant in the part of the city where people went to buy items for a long journey.

Paul, as we say, "put food on the table" by selling tents. Yet he was not famous in his day as a master tentmaker. He did not achieve his fame in history based on his tents.

Jesus is not famous for His carpentry, either. Yet He spent far more years as a carpenter than He did as the founder of a world religion.

B. Occupation

A man's occupation defines him in the eyes of most people, including his own. He explains is place in life in terms of what he does for a living. Why? Because of the dominion covenant. God gave to mankind the task of subduing the earth (Gen. 1:26–28).[1] This defines mankind, along with man's creation in the image of God. A man's occupation requires more hours per day than anything else, except possibly sleeping. What he does for a living seemingly defines his life.

Yet in the day of judgment, no one will ask him how many hours he spent at the office. In matters eternal, the occupation is the person's backdrop. It is not irrelevant, but it is surely not the fundamental issue of life. The Bible makes this clear.

A man's occupation is his primary area of income-generating service. He must serve customers. He is their economic agent. They pay him to provide services. His success on the job is measured in part by the income he receives. He regards his income as positioning him in importance in the marketplace. He wants a raise in pay because this indicates his personal success in satisfying the demand of paying customers.

His income lets him support his family. This points to a curious conclusion: his occupation is subordinate to his role as financial supporter of his family. His family has initial claims on his income. Men declare to wives, "I'm doing this for you and the children." They justify their absence by means of this assertion. Surely, it is plausible in the case of seamen. They are rarely home. The woman who marries one knows that she will not have a husband nearby for most of his years of employment.

1. Gary North, *Sovereignty and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Genesis* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), chaps. 3, 4.

This does not justify hours lost to television. This is time taken away from interaction with the children. But it is common in the modern industrial world. Digital entertainment opportunities are available day and night.

Income from an occupation is hierarchical. Customers are economically sovereign. The possess the most marketable asst: money. The determine who wins and who loses. But income flows to the family. So, the occupation is in the middle of the flow of funds.

Yet for most men, their occupation defines them, not their role as fathers and husbands. Economically, work on the job is merely functional: a means to an end. Yet for most men, their occupations are far closer to an end in life. The more they enjoy what they do, the truer this is.

Why is their this substitution? Final judgment is not said to rest on one's performance on the job. Their economic account books point to people's highest priorities, which are usually associated with the family. Yet men do not spend a lot of time planning the future of their roles as heads of households. They are far more likely to spend time planning their next promotion.

There is a substitution of the occupation's position in the hierarchy of life: from being economically subordinate to customers and family members to the primary position.

Why? Because men get occupation confused with calling.

C. Calling

Paul's calling was to serve as an apostle to the gentiles. This is what he is famous for. He changed Western civilization by founding local congregations, visiting local congregations he had founded, and writing a few letters to local congregations.

He is not famous for his tentmaking. He is famous as an apostle. Why is this the case? Wasn't tentmaking important? Only as a means of financial support. The lives he changed fundamentally with his tents are not recorded anywhere. The lives he changed as a churchman are in the hundreds of millions.

Which was more important? His tentmaking or his apostleship? To ask the question is to answer it.

His tentmaking was his occupation. His apostleship was his calling. I define calling as follows: **the most important thing a person can do in which he is most difficult to replace**.

Jesus' calling was to serve as Savior of the world. He was irreplace-

able. He alone was irreplaceable. Paul's calling was to persuade gentiles of the truth of Jesus' calling. He was barely replaceable. Possibly Apollus could have done this. Possibly John Mark could have. But it is clear in retrospect that Paul was the uniquely gifted person who performed this ministry as assigned.

His occupation helped him maintain his financial independence from churches. He made this plain to the church at Corinth in his famous fund-raising section of his second letter (II Cor. 12:16–18).[2] He was "his own man," meaning God's own man. He owed nothing to those whom he oversaw as an apostle. He only owed satisfactory tents to customers.

We define Paul by means of his calling. His occupation was a means to several ends: supporting his minimal needs of food and shelter, serving his customers, and maintaining his financial independence from congregations. It was important as a means to these ends, but it did not define him. His calling defined him.

It should define every person. It doesn't, but only because so few people ever identify their callings. Of those who do define their callings, most get sidetracked by the affairs of this life. They invest their time, money, and dreams into other zones of their lives.

D. Both Calling and Occupation

Paul used his occupation to finance his calling. Jesus abandoned His occupation for the sake of His calling. He became a wandering teacher, dependent on donations from mostly unknown people. Lazarus was an exception. There were few others.

Jesus was willing to subordinate His ministry to unknown donors, because He had so little time. He verbally called His disciples away from their occupations and callings (if they had any) in order to adopt a unique calling. They became dependent on Him, just as He was dependent on God the Father, as He said so often in the Gospel of John. He was confident about financial support, because He was equally confident about the end of His earthly ministry. He knew what was coming, when it was coming, and how it would turn out. He had no need to worry about donations.

All of the disciples abandoned their occupations. After Jesus' ascension, they never again found ways to fund their callings by way of their callings. There was a complete separation of occupation and

2. Gary North, *Ethics and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on the Epistles* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), ch. 10.

calling in their lives. The disciples did not even serve as donors of the church's money (Acts 6:1–4).[3] They were too important teaching and ruling. Their calling was their occupation: ministry.

Occasionally, we find other occupations that have this characteristic of fusion. A handful of teachers often are paid to do what they do best. Professional athletes for a few years have this advantage. This has only been true in modern times: post 1900. Judges have this advantage. A few lawyers do, though there are far to many who do not. Screen actors have this advantage. Think of movie "extras" who do not,[4] or struggling actors who wait tables, hoping to be in a position to fuse calling and occupation.

Conclusion

The calling is only rarely the same as the occupation. The most important thing that a person can do in which he would be most difficult to replace is closer to apostleship than tentmaking. Men should identify their callings and then subordinate their occupations to their callings. Paul did. One alternative is to abandon the occupation and let donors pay for the calling. Jesus did this. So did the disciples. Finally, a person can seek to fuse the two. Jobs in the judicial system seem to do this. So do jobs in the health care field. These are rare.

3. Chapter 5.

4. One of the few movies ever made about an extra, Billy Crystal's *Memories of Me* (1988), was not a success artistically and was a flop financially.

9

TO SUFFER LOSS FOR THE GOSPEL

> *Then certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists, took upon them to call over them which had evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, We adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preacheth. And there were seven sons of one Sceva, a Jew, and chief of the priests, which did so. And the evil spirit answered and said, Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye? And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, and overcame them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. And this was known to all the Jews and Greeks also dwelling at Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. And many that believed came, and confessed, and shewed their deeds. Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.*
>
> ACTS 19:13–20

The issue here was the hierarchy of God, who forbids the worship of idols: point two of the biblical covenant.[1]

A. Sacrificing Wealth for the Gospel's Sake

The gospel transformed the lives of many people in Ephesus. Some of these people had been occultists. They had made a living by using demonic powers. People who wanted to gain their ends apart from the normal practices of life paid these occultists to call forth power from below.

These occultists owned books that revealed the secrets of calling forth demons to serve men's requests. These books were very valu-

1. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 2. Gary North, *Authority and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Exodus* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), Part 2, *Decalogue and Dominion* (1986), ch. 22.

able. Their value was based on the income that they could generate for those who owned them and followed their instructions. Competition for the information contained in these books had bid up their market value.

The owners of these books had to make a decision. If they were no longer willing to rely on the information contained in these books, their stream of income would be cut off. They could no longer sell their services as miracle workers. The books would nevertheless retain value in the market. While the present owners could no longer in good conscience use these books to generate income, other people were ready to replace them as miracle workers. These would-be replacements lacked access to the formulas, but they were willing to pay to obtain the secret information. They looked into the future and estimated a stream of income available to practitioners of these dark arts. They were willing to pay money the owners of the books in order to purchase what they imagined was considerable income.

The books retained value because the information they contained was believed by would-be replacements to contain practical information on gaining power from below. The owners of the books also believed that the books did contain such information. This indicates that the new converts had been calling on occult forces to gain their ends. The books were not books on trickery or illusion. They contained descriptions of rites and formulas that produced supernatural outcomes.

The owners now faced a dilemma. They were no longer willing to invoke supernatural powers that were in opposition to Christ. But the market value of their books remained high. They could gain considerable wealth by selling permanent access to the income streams that these books provided. But to do this, they would be acting to perpetuate the forbidden practices promoted by the books. Any money gained by such sales would have been tainted.

The alternative was the bonfire. They could figuratively burn piles of money. They could retard the spread of occult information, but only at a high price. They would have to destroy their capital.

Jesus had told the rich young ruler to sell his goods and give the money to the poor (Luke 18:18–25).[2] But these people knew that this command did not apply to them. Their property was inherently immoral. To sell it was to extend its influence. God did not want them to sell these goods, not even for the sake of helping the poor. God's

2. Gary North, *Treasure and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 43.

law was clear on this: "Thou shalt not bring the hire of a whore, or the price of a dog,[3] into the house of the LORD thy God for any vow: for even both these are abomination unto the LORD thy God" (Deut. 23:18). They could have rationalized the sale of these books. They could have said to themselves, "Someone will sell them these books. It might as well be us." By burning the books, the owners would raise the price of such books by restricting the existing supply. This would increase the wealth of covenant-breaking owners of similar books. This made no difference morally. By raising the market value of their competitors' books and practices, these new converts were restricting supply of the occult services rendered. This was more important to God than the wealth-transfer effects of the book-burning.

B. Sacrificing the Gospel for Wealth's Sake

In contrast to these new converts was the guild of idol makers. This guild was successful in Ephesus, where the temple of Diana (Artemis), a goddess of fertility in Ephesus, dominated worship in the city. By Paul's day, it had been reconstructed several times over the previous five or more centuries. The major rebuilding began in 356 B.C., after an arsonist had burned down its predecessor. Two centuries later, Antipater of Sidon listed it as one of the seven wonders of the world. It survived until about 262 A.D., when the Goths destroyed it during a raid.[4]

These silversmiths made small silver shrines for home worship. They had considerable self-interest in preserving the public's faith in Diana.

> For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, which made silver shrines for Diana, brought no small gain unto the craftsmen; Whom he called together with the workmen of like occupation, and said, Sirs, ye know that by this craft we have our wealth. Moreover ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands: So that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshippeth. And when they heard these sayings, they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great is Diana of the Ephesians (Acts 19:24–28).

---

3. Bestiality.

4. It was discovered in 1869 by the British Museum's John Turtle Wood, after a six-year search. Later excavations indicated that there had been five temples on the same site, each constructed on top of the other.

Their protest against Paul led to a near-riot in the city's assembly area, the theater. "And the whole city was filled with confusion: and having caught Gaius and Aristarchus, men of Macedonia, Paul's companions in travel, they rushed with one accord into the theatre" (Acts 19:29). "Some therefore cried one thing, and some another: for the assembly was confused; and the more part knew not wherefore they were come together" (Acts 19:32). This went on for two hours (Acts 19:34).

At this point, a local bureaucrat stood up and delivered a classic bureaucratic speech: a defense of proper procedure.

> And when the townclerk had appeased the people, he said, Ye men of Ephesus, what man is there that knoweth not how that the city of the Ephesians is a worshipper of the great goddess Diana, and of the image which fell down from Jupiter? Seeing then that these things cannot be spoken against, ye ought to be quiet, and to do nothing rashly. For ye have brought hither these men, which are neither robbers of churches, nor yet blasphemers of your goddess. Wherefore if Demetrius, and the craftsmen which are with him, have a matter against any man, the law is open, and there are deputies: let them implead one another. But if ye enquire any thing concerning other matters, it shall be determined in a lawful assembly. For we are in danger to be called in question for this day's uproar, there being no cause whereby we may give an account of this concourse. And when he had thus spoken, he dismissed the assembly (Acts 19:35–41).

His speech ended the uproar. "And after the uproar was ceased, Paul called unto him the disciples, and embraced them, and departed for to go into Macedonia" (Acts 20:1).

The reaction of the silversmiths to Paul's message was the opposite of the reaction of the new converts, who had decided to sacrifice their income for the sake of God. The silversmiths decided to fan the passions of the crowd in order to undermine the work of God. Their primary concern was not the defense of the proper forms of worship. Their primary concern was the defense of their income. Paul's message of redemption by faith in Christ was threatening their business. As people adopted this new faith, they abandoned their idolatry. The silversmiths were in the business of making idols.

The owners of the books were convinced that the information contained in them did convey supernatural power to the users. This is why the books had value. So, they burned their own books. The silversmiths were worried about falling sales due to a shift in faith regarding the supreme local god. The town clerk indicated that Paul

had not preached specifically against Diana. Nevertheless, Paul's preaching of the gospel was sufficient to undermine his listeners' faith regarding idolatry. This threatened to cut into the business of the silversmiths. They took action to prevent this outcome.

Conclusion

The gospel always imposes losses on converts, who must abandon their old ways. In the case of the Ephesians, two groups recognized these reality of these costs: the owners of the occult books and the silversmiths. Members of the former group decided to bear these costs by forfeiting both their income and their capital. Members of the second group decided to remove the source of any reduction in their income. The book owners had been true believers in occultism; now they had become true believers in Christ. The silversmiths were true believers in money: mammon.[5] Only secondarily did they care about the reputation of Diana. Their first order of business was business. Both groups understood the implications of Paul's message: the illegitimacy of idols made with hands. Both groups responded in terms of their underlying faith. The first sacrificed earthly wealth to defend the message. The second defended earthly wealth by sacrificing the message. The book owners testified to their faith in Christ. The silversmiths testified to their faith in mammon. Both groups illustrated the truth of Jesus' words: "No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13).

5. North, *Treasure and Dominion*, ch. 39.

10

THE JOY OF GIVING

> *I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.*
>
> ACTS 20:35

The theocentric focus here is the reliability of God in providing whatever His people need when they are generous to Him through giving to the weak. This is a matter of sanctions: point four of the biblical covenant.[1]

A. Support the Weak

Paul was returning to Jerusalem from his final missionary journey as a free man. In Jerusalem he would be arrested and then sent to prison in Rome.

This final meeting was with the elders of the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17). He knew that he would not see any of them again. "And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more" (vv. 22–25). We

1. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1987] 1992), ch. 4. Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, 5th ed. (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, 2010), ch. 4.

could say that this was his parting shot, the message that these elders would be most likely recall in later years. This message was a kind of last will and testament.

1. Never a Financial Burden

He reminded them that he had not been a financial burden to them. "Yea, ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me." Paul was a maker of tents (Acts 18:3). He had used his skills as a tentmaker to support himself. He had also reminded the Corinthian church that they had not funded him. "Behold, the third time I am ready to come to you; and I will not be burdensome to you: for I seek not yours, but you: for the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. And I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved. But be it so, I did not burden you: nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you with guile. Did I make a gain of you by any of them whom I sent unto you? I desired Titus, and with him I sent a brother. Did Titus make a gain of you? walked we not in the same spirit? walked we not in the same steps?" (I Cor. 12:14–18).

Paul was always concerned that he not be regarded as being in the gospel ministry for the money. Yet he assured his readers that an elder was worthy of his hire. He cited Deuteronomy 25:4. "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn."[2] This obscure Mosaic law was still binding, he said, and it pointed to more than the treatment of oxen. It pointed to the legitimate claim that a minister has on a portion of the income of church members. Nevertheless, he told them, he had not exercised this prerogative. He had maintained both his independence and his immunity from criticism that he was in the ministry for the money. He gloried only in the gospel, not in money. No man could legitimately take this glorying away from him by asserting that his motivation was financial.[3]

> Or I only and Barnabas, have not we power to forbear working? Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges? who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of the fruit thereof? or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock? Say I these things as a man? or saith not the law the

2. Gary North, *Inheritance and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [1999] 2012), ch. 63.

3. Gary North, *Judgment and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on First Corinthians*, 2nd ed.(Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2001] 2012), ch. 11.

> same also? For it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? Or saith he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things? If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ. Do ye not know that they which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar? Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel. But I have used none of these things: neither have I written these things, that it should be so done unto me: for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void. For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me. What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel. For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more (I Cor. 9:6–19).

Paul said much the same thing to the elders at Ephesus. Why? Because, as he had done with the Corinthians, he wanted them to understand a fundamental economic principle of the gospel: it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). This familiar phrase is not found in any of the gospels. It is found only here. Paul attributed these words to Jesus. Either God had informed him that Jesus had said this or else one or more of Jesus' disciples had.

2. Grandparents' Blessing

This principle of giving is not widely accepted, with this universal exception: grandparents. In the relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren, a bond of love exists that enables a grandparent to receive joy from giving wealth to the grandchild. Parents often complain to their parents about their excessive generosity. Parents fear that their children will be spoiled by the gifts. By this, they mean that the children will conclude that money comes too easily in life.

The grandparent sees in the grandchild an opportunity to become a benefactor to a blood relation without having to do this full-time. The grandchild is not his legal or moral responsibility. He can be

generous without compromising his authority over the child, because he has very little authority over the child. Neither he, the child, nor society regards the grandparent as possessing responsibility for the child's upbringing. So, the grandparent can be generous without fear.

Why is it that this same attitude is not present in any other permanent relationship? The grandparent rejoices in the fact that he can be generous to another person, expecting nothing in return. Is he trying to buy affection? Perhaps, but he would not admit this. He is giving for the sake of another sort of return: the blessedness of seeing another person—a weak person—benefit from the gift. But what men and women see with respect to their grandchildren they do not see in other relationships. The covenant of the family produces this response, but this response is unique. Paul was saying that this same perspective should govern our relationships with weak people outside our families.

Paul was saying, on behalf of Jesus, that giving generously to the weak produces a benefit. The benefit will be in heaven, but it will also be in history. God will be glorified by the recipients of the gift. This is great reward for the faithful man, and the evidence that Paul believed this is his own unwillingness to accept money for his services as an apostle. He told the Corinthians in his appeal for funds on behalf of the church at Jerusalem.

> But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work: (As it is written, He hath dispersed abroad; he hath given to the poor: his righteousness remaineth for ever. Now he that ministereth seed to the sower both minister bread for your food, and multiply your seed sown, and increase the fruits of your righteousness;) Being enriched in every thing to all bountifulness, which causeth through us thanksgiving to God. For the administration of this service not only supplieth the want of the saints, but is abundant also by many thanksgivings unto God; Whiles by the experiment of this ministration they glorify God for your professed subjection into the gospel of Christ, and for your liberal distribution unto them, and unto all men; And by their prayer for you, which long after you for the exceeding grace of God in you. Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift (II Cor. 9:6–15).

God has given a gift to us, the death of His son so that we might not perish eternally. We in return give to the weak, just as God gave

to us. God is glorified when we give. This is as it should be, for God gave the unspeakable gift to us, cheerfully.

B. Declining Gratitude

A grandchild is happy with little things. The grandparent has limited resources, but the grandchild, especially when young, receives great joy from a small gift. The giver can produce joy in others less expensively with grandchildren than with anyone else.

As the grandchild grows older, his desires grow larger. The gift from the grandparent seems less significant. The grandchild must possess considerable maturity to appreciate the sacrificial aspect of the gift. It is not so much the price of the gift as the sacrifice involved in giving it that should impress the recipient. This is the principle of the widows' mites: she who gave all that she owned gave more than the rich men who gave more coins (Luke 21:2–4).[4] But grandchildren do not always possess such maturity. The payoff to the giver declines as the recipients grow older but not wiser.

The recipients of charity do not always appreciate it. Envious people may even resent the gift. They do not want to be reminded that others have more money than they do. They do not want to be beholden in any way to the giver. They curse the giver as they curse their poverty. This is sinful behavior, but it does exist.

The covenantally faithful giver is giving to God by way of the recipient. God is always appreciative. He does not need the giver's gift, but He understands the nature of the sacrifice. He always remembers to say, "Thank you," for He is the great Giver who rarely receives a thank you (Luke 17:12–18).

The giver is the one blessed by the act of giving. But to receive the blessing, he must imitate God. He must receive from his own sacrifice a sense of achievement, just as the grandparent does. He must rejoice in the fact that his special redemption by God has enabled him to store up wealth in heaven by being generous in history.[5] "And seek not ye what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind. For all these things do the nations of the world seek after: and your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things. But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you. Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give

4. Gary North, *Treasure and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 50.

5. *Ibid.*, chaps. 26, 34.

you the kingdom. Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:29–34).[6]

Conclusion

It is more blessed to give than to receive. Very few people believe this. This is why they lay up treasure on earth. They do not test Christ's words. Why not? Perhaps they worry about the unknown future. Or they become addicted to the "good life," meaning a life of constant spending. They define themselves and their success by the market value of their assets. Then they use debt to increase the illusion of their success. Jesus warned against all this, but even His followers do not really believe Him. If they did, they would more than tithe. But few Christians even tithe. They do not experience the joy of giving.

The testimony of the New Testament is against the joy of hoarding. Yet this testimony is ignored. Christians read these words, not their heads in agreement, and refuse to alter their spending habits to conform to what they say they affirm. Budgets are a reflection of personal commitment. God allows us to retain 90% of our net productivity. Mammon lures us into a life of reduced blessedness by promising us joy through retaining some portion of God's 10%, as if keeping or spending God's 10% could bring us joy when our 90% does not. That ten percent is a token of our faith in either God or mammon.

Paul told the elders to give in order to receive. It was not that they would necessarily receive money in return. It was that they would necessarily receive God's blessings in the broadest sense. Paul was challenging their faith. His words have challenged the faith of Christians down through the ages.

6. *Ibid.*, ch. 26

CONCLUSION

> *I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.*
>
> ACTS 20:35

There is not much information in the Book of Acts that deals specifically with economics. What little there is reveals an historically exceptional degree of generosity within the fellowship of the early church. Two famous economic passages in the book deal with shared property among members of the Jerusalem church (Acts 2:41–42; 4:33–37).[1]

A third deals with a husband and wife who pretended to share with the church everything they had gained from the sale of their real estate, but who held back a portion of the sale price. For this, God killed them (Acts 5:1–10).[2]

This produced great fear in the local church, but this fear had been preceded by great generosity.

A. Common Ownership

The church at Jerusalem did practice common ownership. The elders/apostles administered funds that were donated to the church by its members. They used the money to help those in need. "Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need" (Acts 4:34–35). When complaints arose against them as administrators, they created

1. Chapters 1, 3.
2. Chapter 4.

the office of deacon (Acts 6).[3] From this time on, the deacons distributed funds to those in need.

The office of deacon has survived. The practice of common property has not. This practice was never imitated by gentile churches. Church members have never been expected to sell their land and homes in order to give the money to the church. The church has in the past has allowed this degree of sacrifice from a few volunteers, including members of monastic orders, but it has recognized that such devotion involves a special call from God. Monks separate themselves into hierarchical orders, live in celibacy, and perform special labors on behalf of the church at large.

The church in Jerusalem had been warned by Jesus that a day would come when members of the church should flee the city. "And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judaea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto. For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled" (Luke 21:20–22). To remove any attachment to the city, members sold their real estate. As it turned out, the days of vengeance did not come for a generation, in A.D. 70,[4] but members who had heard Jesus say this did not know when the judgment would come. They chose to be mobile. They sold their real estate. They thereby announced their faith in the accuracy of Jesus' prophecy. This enabled them to flee the city when the first persecution began (Acts 8:1).

The fact that they had sold their property did not compel them to give away their money to the church. Peter told Ananias, "Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God" (Acts 5:4).[5] Ananias had not been asked, let alone compelled, to share his wealth with the church. He tried to take advantage of the reputation for righteousness that such a sacrificial donation would produce among the members. He kept money from the sale in reserve, as a means of financial safety. He gave the appearance of having trusted God completely, but he did not trust God completely. For having deceived men, he had lied to God. This doomed him.

---

3. Chapter 5

4. David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Ft. Worth, Texas: Dominion Press, 1987).

5. Chapter 4.

The Jerusalem church remained poor. It was the object of charity for the gentile churches (Acts 11:25–30; I Cor. 16:36[6]). By transferring their capital to the church, the members cut off their links to the Old Covenant order. But they also stripped themselves of the streams of income that their capital would have provided. Their wealth was transferred, first, to other residents of Jerusalem; second, the proceeds of the sale of their property became immediate income streams to poorer members. The local church consumed the capital of the richer members, but those in need lived better for a time than they could have lived without this permanent transfer of capital to non-members.

The early church believed strongly in charity. The gentile churches helped the Jerusalem church. Members of the Jerusalem church helped each other economically. There was an institutional break with the idea that tangible wealth is superior to faith in God as a means of preserving life. But Christians also understood that they could not preserve their lifestyles under such conditions of generosity. Jewish churches faced the prophesied judgment that would fall on Old Covenant Israel. All churches faced persecution from an empire that rested on a system of religious syncretism—polytheism—in which citizens and residents would soon be compelled ritually to honor the genius of the emperor, meaning his participation in divinity. This, the Christians could not in good conscience do.[7]

The economic practices of the Jerusalem church led to the geographical mobility of its members but also their impoverishment. Common property did not produce wealth for all. It produced a local economic safety net for a brief period, followed by dependence on the giving of gentile churches. The experience of the Jerusalem church is not to be universalized. The post-apostolic church did not practice common property, although it allowed the practice for monastic orders. But monastic orders required tight discipline by abbots and celibacy for their members. Family life was excluded. A brotherhood of common confession and common discipline replaced martial vows and family discipline.

6. Gary North, *Judgment and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on First Corinthians*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2001] 2012), ch. 17.

7. Ethelbert Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955). Within a decade of Paul's arrival in Rome, Nero launched a great persecution of Christians (A.D. 64/65). The church did not gain permanent liberty of religious practice until Constantine gained the throne in the early decades of the fourth century.

B. A Visibly Different Lifestyle

The Book of Acts reveals a new community based on a radical break with the surrounding community. They had been called out of those communities, just as Abram had been called out of Ur of the Chaldees. Stephen began his self-defense with this reminder: "Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee. Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell" (Acts 7:2–4). But the Christians' departure from their communities was not geographical; it was confessional. They had been called out, but they had also been called into the church, the ecclesia, the called-out covenantal community of faith.

This new community was based on a common confession. This confession was both historical and eschatological. It was based on a new vision of a supernatural King who is also human, and a supernatural kingdom that operates in history, for its battle with rival kingdoms takes place primarily in history. Service to the King involves a fundamental break with a person's previous history. It involves a move into eternity. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36). This break with the past and the past's legacy in the present also affirms history in terms of history's future transformation. It affirms the Great Commission.[8]

One manifestation of this break with the past was visible to all Jerusalem in the members' disdain for real estate, but it can also be seen in their lack of concern regarding their economic futures. This was true in both branches of the early church. They shared their wealth with others inside the church. They regarded God as the source of their hoped-for streams of future income. They believed, correctly, that it was not what they owned but what they affirmed that would secure their lifestyle in the future. They dared not trust in family, former friends, or wealth. They trusted in God and His called-out people. This trust was manifested in their sacrificial giving.

The Book of Acts is notable for its emphasis on church members' sharing of their possessions. This message is consistent with the pic-

8. Kenneth L. Gentry, *The Greatness of the Great Commission: The Christian Enterprise in a Fallen World* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990).

ture of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: a spiritual revolutionary who was disdainful of riches. The same author wrote both documents. The Book of Acts describes churches whose members acted consistently with Jesus' teaching regarding the laying up of treasure in heaven by giving away treasure on earth. Jesus' economics was missionary economics.[9] The early church adopted His economics.

The members separated themselves from the cultures around them. They created a new culture based on an ethic of service to God through service to men, especially oppressed and suffering men. Paul wrote: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:7–10).

This spiritual outlook produced economic practices that were visibly different from those in the surrounding cultures. The budgets of church members testified to their break with the prevailing worldviews, in Jerusalem and Ephesus and Corinth and Macedonia. They trusted in God and trusted in each other. They saw themselves as a separated community of faith which was uniquely protected by God. This was especially true of the Jerusalem church, whose members knew of the coming judgment on the city (Luke 21:20–22). They structured their budgets accordingly. Their pattern of expenditure reflected their faith. Jesus had said that this should be the case. "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal" (John 12:25). Paul warned: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom. 12:2). This followed his call to complete sacrifice: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1).[10]

The followers of Jesus in the Book of Acts did not trust the world. They saw themselves as spiritual strangers in this world. The question

---

9. Gary North, *Treasure and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Luke*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 26.

10. Gary North, *Cooperation and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on Romans*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, [2000] 2012), ch. 8.

was this: To what extent was their world identified by God as part of the Old Covenant Order? Are Christ's followers to remain equally alienated from the world if Christian principles ever transform it as a result of both the Great Commission and common grace?[11] To what extent may Christians conform themselves to the world around them after the world has been begun to be transformed by the gospel?[12] These questions are not answered by the Book of Acts. Paul answered them: "Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:11–13).[13] In good times and hard times, Paul learned to be content. This way, he could be a missionary in any social environment. External circumstances would not affect him.

Conclusion

The Book of Acts offers the history of the origins of the earliest communities of Christian faith. It offers the history of early Christian missions. Local churches became missionary outposts. This was especially true of Jerusalem and Ephesus. Church members regarded themselves as missionaries or supporters of missionaries. They saw their personal wealth as spiritual capital for the funding of the gospel message and the temporary support of the hard-pressed members of the community of faith.

"It is more blessed to give than to receive." Is this a temporary principle or a universal one? It is universal. Paul placed no qualifications on it. But blessedness can come in both history or eternity. In this sense, generous giving is always wise, but the resulting blessedness in history is never fully predictable, either in terms of its form or its timing.

Men must trust God to provide these blessings. They must trust God's grace. This takes faith. It ought to take greater faith for a man in poverty than for a wealthy man, for the poor man has experienced fewer of God's blessings. He does not how to accumulate riches. He

11. Gary North, *Dominion and Common Grace: The Biblical Basis of Progress* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987).

12. Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, [1992] 1997).

13. Gary North, *Ethics and Dominion: An Economic Commentary on the Epistles* (Dallas, Georgia: Point Five Press, 2012), ch. 23.

gives sacrificially, just as the widow gave. He has no visible economic reserves. The rich man does. The rich man risks less when he gives, for he knows how to replenish his reserves. In practice, however, God grants confident faith more often to those in poverty than to those with many assets. Least of all does He provide such faith to the rich. "And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:24). God grants to the poor a strong faith in a God-ordained future. They give sacrificially more readily than do the rich.